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# Book Review: Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800, by Erik R. Seeman

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**Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800, by Erik R. Seeman, 2010, Early American Studies Series, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 384 pages, 28 illustrations, $45.00 (cloth), $24.95 (paper).**

Reviewed by Richard Veit

It is common for reviews to be littered with hyperbolic comments describing even rather average books in laudatory terms. In this case, the praise is deserved. Erik R. Seeman's *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* is a tour de force. Although the literature on death, burial, and commemoration is growing at a rapid rate, this book does something that no other volume to date has done. It provides a deep contextual analysis of North American deathways in the 17th and 18th centuries. It reflects a massive amount of research and is richly detailed. Archaeologists, historians, and other scholars will find this volume an invaluable addition to their libraries. Frankly, I could not put the book down. It is full of interesting tidbits and framed around a convincing argument. Seeman presents a compelling case that it was through their deathways that people in early America came to understand each other. Deathways is an inclusive term that Seeman uses to encompass a wide variety of activities: burial practices, funerals, mourning, commemoration, and deathbed scenes. He employs ethnographic, historical, and archaeological data to support his thesis. For Seeman, death is the key to cross-cultural understanding in part because it was so ubiquitous in early America; in part because the religious systems of all the groups engaged in these colonial encounters tried to explain death and the afterlife, and finally because deathways leave material traces that other cultural activities do not.

Seeman is a historian of the Atlantic World and that perspective shows through in this volume. The book begins with an examination of death practices in both the Old World and in pre-Columbian North America. European Protestant and Roman Catholic practices, Jewish mortuary customs, Native American traditions, and West African deathways are all examined. Unlike many studies of commemorative practices, Seeman begins his study by looking at attitudes towards death before the Columbian encounter, in both the Old and New Worlds. In his examination of European practices, he devotes considerable time to the *Ars moriendi*, or art of dying well, a 15th-century bestseller, which provided advice on what to do to alleviate the horror of dying. Who would have thought that one of the first best-selling self-help books dealt with such a serious subject! Seeman's familiarity with the deathways of disparate Old World groups provides a strong foundation for his subsequent examination of later European practices in North America.

Next, the volume examines the encounters of Old and New World cultures, through the lens of deathways. The examples run the gamut. Seeman examines Columbus and the Tainos, Cortés and the Mexicas, and Hernando de Soto's encounters with Native Americans in the American southeast. Although many of these episodes will be familiar to readers, Seeman brings together the pieces to form a coherent study. There is also an interesting discussion of Don Luís, a Paspahegh adolescent who, in the mid-1500s, was taken from the Chesapeake region to Spain and then to Mexico, where he was carefully educated to serve as a translator for a planned and ultimately failed Jesuit mission to Ajacán on the Chesapeake. Seeman is interested in Don Luís' role in the later murder of his Jesuit sponsors. He uses this incident to explore the different understandings of death, martyrdom, and the treatment of the dead among Spanish and the Paspahegh. Next the Roanoke and Jamestown colonies are examined. In addition to showing his mastery of the historical literature, Seeman draws extensively on the results of the recent archaeological fieldwork at Jamestown as well as the earlier excavations at Martin's Hundred as he compares Powhatan and English burial practices. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, Seeman examines how European, in this case Anglican, burial practices were reinterpreted in Virginia.

The volume then heads north to New France where the "holy bones" and burial practices of the Jesuits are examined. The missionary efforts of Jesuits such as Father Pierre Biard among the local Micmacs are

discussed, as are the conflicting views of what constituted a good death. The encounters of Father Brébouf and the Hurons are also discussed, as is the Feast of the Dead practiced among the Huron. Using archaeological evidence from the mission community, Sainte-Marie among the Hurons, Seeman studies the growing syncretism visible in 17th-century Huron burial practices.

New England is visited next, where Seeman recounts in some detail the story of the Plymouth colonists and their grave robbing activities. Shortly after their initial landfall, the Pilgrims unearthed some recent Native American graves and, to their surprise, discovered the burial of a shipwrecked European sailor accompanied by a mixture of European and Native American accoutrements. Seeman uses his cross-cultural lens to examine this curious encounter. He then turns to the rich Narragansett graves found in Rhode Island. Using archaeological evidence and the writings of Roger Williams, Seeman examines how these sites have been interpreted. Ultimately, he concurs with Constance Crosby that the European goods found with many of these burials were likely seen as sources of *manit*, or spiritual power (p. 171).

African-American deathways are examined next. Seeman draws from examples in the Caribbean as well as from the continent. Again, much of his research is informed by archaeology. His ability to find intriguing examples is noteworthy. At Newton plantation in Barbados, we are introduced to what are almost certainly the graves of a female witch and a male shaman. We also are treated to detailed descriptions of African burial practices in the Americas. Next Seeman turns his attention to the African Burial Ground in New York and the noteworthy excavations there. After considerable discussion, he concludes that "the material remains of the vast majority of the African Burial Ground interments are identical to those of white New Yorkers" (p. 207). Perhaps this is not completely surprising in that many religious rituals leave few traces in the archaeological record. Seeman describes a few of the more intriguing burials. He finds the waist beads found with Burial 340 a convincing reflection of traditional African practices and notes that the beads would have helped hold up skirts and been invisible to all but the wearer and a select group of individuals. At the same time, he finds the straight pins and rings found with Burial 147 to be persuasive evidence of conjuring rituals. However, he is unconvinced that the heart-shaped image found on the coffin lid of Burial 101 is a Sankofa symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana, noting that hearts were commonly employed in European ideology and that heart-shaped patterns of tacks are also present on Euro-American coffins from the same time period (p. 215).

The seventh chapter deals with Jewish deathways in the New World. Small Jewish populations were found in urban centers up and down the Atlantic Coast and in the Caribbean. Early Jewish burial grounds in Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Curaçao are discussed. The maintenance of traditional Jewish burial grounds and other cultural practices proved challenging for these dispersed populations. Some outstanding examples of Jewish gravestones, carved in Europe but erected in the Caribbean, are illustrated. Interestingly, quite a few draw their imagery from Christian sources, and many contain graven images.

Next the volume examines burial and condolence practices during the Seven Years' War. In Seeman's view, death diplomacy, or an understanding of cross-cultural deathways, was crucial to the outcome of the war. He notes that soldiers on both sides were motivated by the warrior ethic, which made them willing to risk their lives for their cause. Moreover, the deaths of important leaders provided opportunities for European forces and their Native American allies to reach cross-cultural understandings or, in some cases where rapport could not be reached, created fractures in already tenuous alliances. Ultimately, Seeman concludes that British sympathy to and understanding of Native American deathways contributed to their success in the Seven Years' War and set the stage for later colonial efforts.

The author wraps up by reiterating his thesis that one way to understand the interaction of peoples in the New World is through the history of cross-cultural encounters with death (p. 291). Like food, language, sex, and music, deathways reflect one way that people understood and communicated about their

world. By the 19th century, ideas of death and burial were changing in new and interesting ways. Seeman touches briefly upon these later changes.

This well-written, timely book has much to recommend it. I found few flaws. The discussion of pre-contact Native American burials might have been expanded. While the volume contains considerable information drawn from archaeological excavations, the author does not discuss in any great detail the early grave markers or death practices of the settlers who came in great numbers to Eastern North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. I was surprised that the only illustrations of classic New England grave markers are of stones commemorating African Americans in Newport, Rhode Island. Admittedly, these are extraordinarily important markers, but I would have liked more on early grave markers and commemoration. Perhaps this is a topic for another volume.

These quibbles aside, I found this to be a valuable book. It is jam packed with information and would work well in advanced undergraduate or graduate courses on historical archaeology, the anthropology of religion, commemoration, the Atlantic World, and early American history. Seeman is to be complimented on producing an important volume.

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**The Archaeology of American Labor and Working-Class Life, by Paul A. Shackel, 2009, The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective Series, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 160 pages, 20 illustrations, $69.95 (cloth), $19.95 (paper).**

Reviewed by James A. Delle

This volume, published by the University Press of Florida as part of T*he American Experience in Archaeological Perspective* series, sets out to provide a concise review of the recent literature on the historical archaeology of labor in the United States, concluding with a series of recommendations on where the archaeology of the working class might go. The volume is organized into six chapters, with a separate introduction and conclusion. The substantive chapters address the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States, the development of surveillance technologies in industrial settings, working-class housing, working-class resistance to the industrial order, future directions for Labor Archaeology, and the interplay between memory, commemoration, and the archaeological record of working-class life, and how this latter has been publically interpreted.

In his brief introduction to the volume, Shackel points out that, over the course of the past two decades or so, the archaeology of industry has moved beyond its origins in industrial archaeology; the latter being a term laden with meaning and relevance to those archaeologists interested in examining the development of industrial technology. Shackel argues that only recently have industrial archaeologists begun to turn their attention away from the machines of industry to the lives of the workers who operated those machines. He clearly states that his goal in this book is to review research on working-class life, rather than the traditional technologically-driven work of many industrial archaeologists.

Chapter One explores the rise of industrial capitalism through the lens of Wallerstein's World Systems approach. Shackel contends that to best understand the lives of the working class in the United States, one must first consider that the industrial